MORAL TEACHINGS
of the
NEW TESTAMENT

BENNION

MORAL TEACHINGS
OF THE
NEW TESTAMENT

A
SOURCE BOOK WITH COMMENTARIES

By

MILTON BENNION
PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AND
SECONDARY EDUCATION
AND
DEAN OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION,
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Published by
THE DESERET BOOK COMPANY
Salt Lake City, Utah
1928

COPYRIGHT
BY
MILTON BENNION
1928

Printed in the United States of America
By THE DESERET NEWS PRESS

PREFACE

This manuscript is the outcome of class discussions with college students in the University of Utah. The purpose has been to seek out and to classify the purely moral or ethical teachings of the New Testament and to compare these teachings with current ethical and educational theory and practice. In the main the New Testament passages speak for themselves, while the commentaries deal with contemporary ethical and educational thought on the same topics. No attempt is made toward historical criticism of the New Testament text. For the purpose of this study no attention need be given to questions of origin or authorship of the source materials here cited.

All questions of theology are purposely omitted from the commentaries and also from the source materials, except as some of these doctrines may be inseparable from important moral principles embodied in the same text. The term, religion, in the commentaries has reference to the practical everyday problems of the moral and spiritual life.

No attempt has been made to exhaust the moral teachings of New Testament writers; but only to assemble in more convenient form what seemed to the author most fundamental.

The author is especially indebted to his colleague in the Department of Philosophy, Professor E. E. Ericksen, for careful criticism of the manuscript and especially for assistance in organizing the text. Thanks for constructive criticism of the text are due the Rev. Frank L. Hunt, pastor of the First Unitarian Society of Salt Lake City; to Dr. R. D. Harriman, associate professor of ancient languages in the University of Utah; and to Dr. Adam S. Bennion, superintendent of schools of the L. D. S. Church. The author's thanks are also due his secretary, Miss Marian E. Jones, for careful literary and linguistic criticism of the manuscript throughout.

Suggestions for further improvement of the text will be thankfully received.

MILTON BENNION

CONTENTS

Preface 3
Introduction 7

PART I

THE RELIGIOUS AND MORAL UNITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Chapter
I Truth 17
II Moral Freedom 23
III The Function of Evil 26
VI Human Solidarity and Kinship in a Common Cause 30

PART II

NEW TESTAMENT STANDARDS OF MORALS

V General and Typical Standards 39
VI Conditions of Individual Moral Development 50
  A. Humility, Desire for Truth and Right Life, Willingness to Obey Truth and to Serve Fellowmen
VII Conditions of Individual Moral Development (Continued) 57
  B. Consecration to the Ideal
VIII "By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them" 67
IX Moral Obligation and Growth 73
X The Relation of Thought to Action 79
XI Temptation—The Place of Choice in the Moral Life 83
XII Means and Ends: Letter and Spirit 88

PART III

QUALITIES OF CHARACTER

Chapter

XIII Love—The First Great Commandment 95
XIV The Evidences of Love 102
XV Trespass, Reconciliation, and Forgiveness 108
XVI Gratitude or Thankfulness 116
XVII Stability—Steadfastness of Purpose 119
XVIII Sincerity 124
XIX Trustworthiness 132
XX Moral Courage 137
XXI Covetousness 153
XXII Hospitality and Liberality 157
XXIII Temperance 163
XXIV Industry 169

PART IV

APPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

XXV Property 175
XXVI Marriage, Divorce, and Sexual Sins 183
XXVII Justice and Civil Government 198
XXVIII Peace and War 216
Conclusion 223
Appendix A Socrates and Jesus 228
Appendix B References 232
Index 235

THE MORAL TEACHINGS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Introduction

Are there principles, laws, and ideals that persist through the centuries, or are all things in the universe in a state of perpetual flux? This problem is as old as philosophy. The Greek philosopher Parmenides, of the Eleatic School, about 500 B. C., answered that all is being, that being is one and unchangeable, and that apparent change is but an illusion of the senses. Democritus, of the Atomists School, less than a hundred years later, held that the universe is composed of an infinite number of minute atoms each in a state of perpetual motion, and that only the atoms and the void are real. The combinations of atoms are forever being varied, thus keeping the universe in a state of perpetual flux.

Somewhere between these two extreme views philosophical thinking has ever since continued to oscillate. No one will now deny change altogether; but as to what, if anything, has permanence, and what, especially in the realm of morals and religion, is subject to perpetual change, there is great variety of opinion.

In contemporary thought, due probably to the influence of the theory of evolution in science and the pragmatic method in philosophy, emphasis is generally placed upon change. This point of view is by some current authors carried to such an extreme as to abandon all thought of anything permanent in human experience; all is in perpetual process of reconstruction—principles, laws, moral standards, ideals. This philosophy naturally stimulates a feeling of uncertainty in all thought, plan, and purpose; there seems to remain but one stable fact in the universe; that is, that all things are unstable. This is not far from the point of view of Democritus. His view, however, was applied primarily to the physical universe, while some current writers apply it with equal force to all human experience, including the most ideal or spiritual.

On the other hand, the ideas of Parmenides are not wholly abandoned in current thinking. In the field of religion especially there are many who minimize change and correspondingly emphasize permanence, and more especially permanence of principles, laws, and ideals.

The extreme advocates of perpetual change are likely to foster in youth under their tuition a disposition to abandon all standards thus far attained and tested through centuries of human experience. Between the time of this intellectual abandonment of race standards and the creation of new ones out of his own ever-fluctuating experiences the youth is likely to find himself in a world of moral and religious chaos. In case he survives this period with sufficient strength to reconstruct moral standards of his very own and to make them of real value as guides to conduct, these reconstructed standards are likely to coincide with, or at least to include, those great and fundamental race standards which were abandoned in his earlier mental fluctuations.

The extremists on the side of permanence, on the other hand, are in constant danger of stagnation of thought and of becoming a block in the way of all progress, social and moral, as well as intellectual. With them, all human problems worthwhile have been settled once for all, and youth is left with the simple task of learning what this settlement was and is. It so happens, unfortunately for the youth thus trained, that new discoveries are constantly being made, new conditions arise, social, moral, and religious, as well as physical. There is always the necessity of adjusting thought and conduct to these new conditions. The mind that is congealed cannot do this; either it remains congealed, and therefore out of joint with the world; or figuratively speaking it bursts asunder, then the chaos that follows may be even worse than with the youth who was carried away with the fascination of the perpetual flux idea.

With the mental tendency toward perpetual flux commonly goes also a strong tendency to emphasize individual differences. As nothing is the same in two consecutive moments, so are no two individuals alike. The thought of the uniqueness of the individual is sometimes so emphasized as to obscure characteristics common to the human species or to any one of its subdivisions. The fact that there are laws, physical, mental, and moral, that apply to all individuals, or to the more homogeneous groups, is, to say the least, minimized. This point of view was highly developed by the ancient Greek Sophists and Skeptics. It has since recurred at intervals in history and is not without representatives today; this is, manifestly, another source of moral and religious chaos.

With the mental tendency to emphasize permanence frequently goes a disposition to ignore individual differences, including differences in thought, tastes, and ideals. Individual initiative is discouraged, if not tabooed, while exact conformity to fixed standards is rewarded. To the extent that this tendency prevails civilization comes to a standstill. The progress of some peoples has by this means been arrested for centuries. Also, individuals who have attempted to introduce reforms have at various times been hanged upon the cross or burned at the stake.

Between these two extremes of thought is an intermediate position which gives due recognition both to permanence and to change, both to individual differences and to characteristics in common. To develop the ethical implications of this intermediate position was the task of Socrates. His position was offensive alike to the skeptical Sophists, on the one hand, and to the adherents of time-honored, fixed traditions, on the other. While Socrates was finally sentenced to drink the hemlock, this only gave greater influence to his teachings and helped to gain for him the title, Father of Ethics.*

Socrates held that beneath the superficial differences in individuals, so emphasized by the Sophists, there are fundamental likenesses. Socrates was concerned to discover these likenesses in the realm of rational and moral judgments. Discovery, analysis, and systematization of the former type of judgments developed the science of logic; of the later type, the science of ethics.

---

*A comparative statement concerning the life experiences and influence of Socrates and Jesus will be found in Appendix A.

It will be generally admitted that if one's thinking is to arrive at certain and sound conclusions, it must conform to the fundamental laws of logic, some of which have been known to logicians for more than 2,000 years. These laws are statements of common and apparently permanent standards to which all rational processes must conform to arrive at valid conclusions. It is these universal characteristics of human minds in relationship to a common world of which all are a part that makes possible a body of scientific knowledge; knowledge that has validity far beyond that of mere individual opinion.

It will also be generally admitted by thoughtful people, except the few who are completely carried away with the notions of perpetual flux and the overshadowing uniqueness of the individual, that if one would develop morally and contribute toward the moral progress of his community, he must conform to moral principles that are just as valid and universal as are the laws of logic: some of these, too, have been the common property of civilized men for several thousand years. These moral laws must, of course, be dynamic in the life of the individual, who must, also, if he is to be a positive moral character, have strong personal initiative and ability to deal with new situations in such a way as to produce the maximum social good. This is not different in principle from the conditions that must be attached to conformity rational and moral judgments. Discovery, analysis, and systematization of the former type of judgments developed the science of logic; of the later type, the science of ethics.

It will be generally admitted that if one's thinking is to arrive at certain and sound conclusions, it must conform to the fundamental laws of logic, some of which have been known to logicians for more than 2,000 years. These laws are statements of common and apparently permanent standards to which all rational processes must conform to arrive at valid conclusions. It is these universal characteristics of human minds in relationship to a common world of which all are a part that makes possible a body of scientific knowledge; knowledge that has validity far beyond that of mere individual opinion.

It will also be generally admitted by thoughtful people, except the few who are completely carried away with the notions of perpetual flux and the overshadowing uniqueness of the individual, that if one would develop morally and contribute toward the moral progress of his community, he must conform to moral principles that are just as valid and universal as are the laws of logic: some of these, too, have been the common property of civilized men for several thousand years. These moral laws must, of course, be dynamic in the life of the individual, who must, also, if he is to be a positive moral character, have strong personal initiative and ability to deal with new situations in such a way as to produce the maximum social good. This is not different in principle from the conditions that must be attached to conformity to the laws of logic. Mere mechanical conformity to these laws will never make a scientist. A scientist must have dynamic mental power, individual initiative, and ability to solve new problems. These conditions, however, do not give him liberty to ignore or set aside the laws of logic.

The moral teachings of the New Testament, when brought together in classified form, constitute a comprehensive compendium of moral principles, laws, standards, and ideals. When these teachings are put in the form of moral laws, such as the Ten Commandments, it will be noted that most of them are much older than the New Testament; these laws are merely reaffirmed by Jesus and his disciples. The conflicts that are manifest between the old and the new are, for the most part, also the same sort of conflicts that occurred earlier in Hebrew history between the very spiritually minded prophets, such as Isaiah and Hosea, and the very literally and materially minded interpreters of the law. This spiritual development, so manifest in some of the earlier Hebrew poets and prophets, is evidenced in still higher degree in the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus and his apostles. This moral growth, it will be noted, did not consist in denial of all the earlier moral attainments, but in conservation of the most fundamental and basic moral laws of the Mosaic and later prophetic periods together with development of some new and higher laws, but, more especially, in new interpretations and applications of laws long accepted as valid.

The moral teachings of Jesus are preeminent in the history of morality because he taught ideals and standards that have stood the test of centuries of human thought and experience and are still declared by philosophers and statesmen to represent the highest ideals of personal character and of social relations. Realization of these ideals in practice has been retarded, not because the ideals were defective, but rather because of the slowness of man's moral progress and the even slower progress of social institutions in realizing the ideals long since accepted in theory.

Most of the adverse criticism of the moral teachings of the New Testament is really directed against the characteristic modes of thought, illustrations, or supporting arguments used by some of the New Testament authors, rather than against the moral principles and ideals themselves. This is well illustrated in the adverse criticsm of Paul's epistles because of his identifying the vices with the flesh and the virtues with the spirit. It should be noted that this criticism does not affect the validity of his classification of types of conduct and of his commendation of the virtues and his condemnation of the vices. These as qualities of character are evaluated today, for the most part, as they were then. In speaking of them and their origins, Paul used the terminology and habits of thought then current. The fact that this terminology may have helped to mislead some of the medieval saints is unfortunate, but it should not blind one to the fundamental soundness of these moral teachings. Modern writers may substitute for the flesh, as used by Paul, unorganized and unregulated animal instincts and appetites; and for the spirit, high moral ideals. With these adaptations of language to current ethical terminology the same passages might well escape the adverse criticisms here referred to.

The point to be emphasized is that, in general, the qualities of character highly commended in the New Testament continue to be worthy of the highest commendation; the qualities of character disapproved continue to be disapproved. The same principles may be, and often times are, stated in the form of moral laws—laws the validity of which persists through the centuries—laws that apply to all civilized peoples irrespective of race, color, or social status. Application of these laws will, of course, vary with changing social conditions. Also enlightened, progressive men may discover new and higher moral laws and hitherto unrecognized moral obligations. These facts call for recognition of the necessity of constant study and adaptation of long established moral principles to new conditions, but not for repudiation of these principles, except as experience has demonstrated that they are false or valueless.

PART I

THE RELIGIOUS AND MORAL UNITY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

CHAPTER I

TRUTH

A. As the Principle of Right Action

"Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John VIII: 31, 32.

"If ye love me, keep my commandments.

"And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever;

"Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you and shall be in you." John XIV: 15-17.

Jesus, praying for his disciples, says:

"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

"As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world.

"And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth." John XVII: 17-19.

"Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently:

"Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever." I Peter I: 22, 23.

A test of truth: "Now about the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and taught.

"And the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?

"Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me.

"*If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.*

"He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory; but he that seeketh his glory that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him." John VII: 14-18.

B. As Related to Veracity

"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession,

"And kept back part of the price, (his wife also being privy to it) and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

"But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?

"Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.

"And Ananias hearing these words, fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.

"And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

"And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in.

"And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much.

"Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out.

"Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.

"And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." The Acts V: 1-11.

"Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds." Colossians III: 9.

After again admonishing the Ephesians to "put off * * * the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;" he then writes:

"And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

"Wherefore *putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor*: for we are members one of another." Ephesians IV: 24, 25.*

"Dearly beloved, I beseech you, as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul:

"Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." I Peter II: 11, 12.

"He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

"But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and *all liars*, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." Revelation XXI: 7, 8.

Commentary

The moral freedom that comes through knowledge of and conformity to truth and the bondage of evil that comes through ignorance of truth or through disobedience to known truth have their counterparts in civic and social life in the civic freedom of the citizen who obeys the laws of the state and in the restraints imposed upon the citizen who defies the law.

---

*See also I Thess. IV: 9-12; Romans XIII: 8-10.

Another very significant aspect of truth is its relation to holiness or righteousness. "Sanctify them through thy truth," indicates that truth is not only a means to freedom but also to righteousness, which is a fundamental goal of religious endeavor.

From a modern and secular standpoint truth is a fundamental element in goodness and is essential to all progress. All modern study aims at the discovery of truth and its applications to human welfare. Discovery of the laws of nature enables man so to order his life that the operation of these laws will yield to him the greatest benefits. A notable example of this is found in the laws of health or hygiene. These laws involve both knowledge of the laws of nature that pertain to human life and knowledge of how to behave in order that operation of the laws of nature may contribute toward, rather than detract from, realization of the most perfect health attainable. A law of health properly relates to this control of one's conduct in the light of scientific knowledge and rational aims. In this sense a person may properly be admonished to obey the laws of health. The popular admonition to obey the laws of nature is, however, quite illogical. Since no man can break a law of nature, this exhortation should be revised to read, "Be not broken by the laws of nature." The laws of nature are one form of truth and truth in this sense cannot be broken.

In the mental world truth is revealed in the laws of mind, in such humanistic sciences as psychology and sociology. Both personal goodness and social progress are brought about through proper application of these truths in education and in civic and social life.

The search for truth and loyalty to it are the dominant and indispensable elements in scientific research. Without these qualities true science and scientific research are impossible.

Another aspect of this subject is the obligation to be truthful in social relations, and, as a corollary, the prohibition of lying. As sincere search for truth is essential to science so is personal honesty essential to success in the professions, in industry, and in commerce. The scientific spirit that enters into the study of medicine should enter with equal force into its practice. Diagnosis and prescription have value only to the extent that they conform to truth. In the practice of law to the extent that truth is perverted, justice miscarries; yet promotion of justice is the most essential aim of this profession. It is only honest industry that can succeed in the long run, and no honorable captain of industry would care to be associated with any other kind. In commerce and business generally the same principles hold.

The scriptural meaning of neighbor, together with the citations from Paul and Peter, show clearly that the early Christian leaders had broken away from the merely tribal or national morality so prevalent in ancient times. Honesty, truthfulness, and square dealing toward those without as well as toward those within the church was laid down as a specific moral and religious requirement. This principle is thoroughly confirmed in modern ethics, although in practice it is sometimes suspended in secret diplomacy, and commonly so, in some degree, between warring nations.

Logical and ethical analysis of the grounds of the moral obligation to be truthful furnish ample philosophical justification for this ancient command, which is one of the fundamentals of every great religion.

PROBLEMS

1. (a) Under what conditions may knowledge of the truth make a person free?

(b) What kind of freedom is referred to in John VIII: 32?

2. (a) From the standpoint of its social utility, uphold veracity as a moral requirement.

(b) Why, then, is lying immoral?

3. How are the laws of health related to the laws of nature?

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF MORAL FREEDOM

"Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John VIII:31, 32.

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only deceiving your own selves.

"For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

"For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.

"*But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.*" James I: 22-25.

"So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by *the law of liberty.*" James II: 12.

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." Galatians V: 1.

Commentary

Truth represents the permanent and freedom the dynamic elements in the moral and religious life. They are interdependent. Moral freedom is not a gift of nature, nor can it be conferred upon an individual by authority of the state. It is rather a goal to be attained by each individual by long continued